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ABSTRACT

This case study of a central office school improvement initiative in an urban school system examines instructional leadership practices of two junior high school principals. The school-based research focuses on correlates of school effectiveness in "low achieving" settings and the principals' capacity to "reflect-in-action," an ability to make ongoing effective decisions about unpredictable problems and situations. Study findings suggest that development and practice of instructional leadership behaviors in low-achieving schools are associated with (1) the environment (school climate); (2) the principals' own past professional experiences and staff development; (3) the issue of empowerment; and (4) the principals' capacity to reflect-in-action. The report presents a typology of principals' instructional leadership practices and an analysis of the researcher's role delineation. The study's primary implications are (1) school districts' research offices can have a positive effect on improvement initiatives through the methodologies of action research and ethnography and (2) researchers' and practitioners' capacities to achieve positive educational outcomes are enhanced by the ability to reflect-in-action. Researcher and principal can thereby become agents for change in improvement initiatives. The report concludes with two reference pages and an appendix identifying the typology and its ethnographic conceptual foundations. (CJH)

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REFLECTION-IN-ACTION AS A PRINCIPAL'S LEARNING AND DECISION-MAKING TOOL

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Paper presented at the 1987 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Washington, D. C.
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ABSTRACT

REFLECTION-IN-ACTION AS A PRINCIPAL'S LEARNING AND DECISION-MAKING TOOL

In a case study of a central office school improvement initiative in an urban public school system, the instructional leadership practices of two junior high school principals were examined. This was a school-based research effort that focused on the correlates of school effectiveness in "low achieving" settings, and the principals' capacity to reflect-in-action.

The findings of the study suggest that the development and practice of instructional leadership behaviors in low achieving schools are associated with (1) the environment (school climate); (2) the principals' own past professional experiences and staff development; (3) the issue of empowerment; and, (4) the principals' capacity to reflect-in-action. A typology of principals' instructional leadership practices was produced from the study's findings.

Two chief implications of the study are: (1) that school districts' research offices can have a positive impact on school improvement initiatives through the methodologies of action research and ethnography; and, (2) researchers' and practitioners' capacity to achieve positive educational outcomes is enhanced by the ability to reflect-in-action. Thus, the researcher and school principal can become agents for positive change in school improvement initiatives.

REFLECTION-IN-ACTION AS A PRINCIPAL'S LEARNING AND DECISION-MAKING TOOL

Wesley C. Pugh, Ph.D.

School District of Philadelphia

Introduction

> Reflection-in-action is a sense of artistry professionals at the top of their fields often bring to their work - an artistry that derives from their capacity to think intelligently about what they are doing while they are doing it. This ability enables master professionals to cope effectively with the unfamiliar and unexpected, and so handle the unpredictable problems they encounter with confidence and skill.
>
> Donald Schon

This study focused on school effectiveness and school improvement research correlated with school principals' leadership and decision-making, i.e., principals' reflection-in-action. The two principals in this study provided a unique perspective on junior high school education.

School effectiveness research has focused almost exclusively on elementary schools (Cuban, 1983). The insights derived from this study are unique because while junior high schools are less complex educational organizations than high schools, they are more intricate than elementary schools. The research focus on junior high schools provides a suitable median range of complexity and educational organization issues related to school effectiveness and instructional leadership.

The major thesis of this research is that a principal's reflection-in-action serves as a basis for initiating and developing instructional leadership practices in school improvement programs. Reflection-in-action is thereby a learning and decision-making occurrence for the reflective practitioner.

This study was a school-based research effort using action research and ethnography as the primary methodologies. School-based research has become an important focus within the school improvement research literature (Crandall, Eiseman, Louis, 1986; Goodlad, 1984). Both methodologies are considered relevant and a "good fit" in the study of school effectiveness (Katz, 1980). The chief data sources of this study were interviews and survey results.

What was learned about school principals in this study was that the development of instructional leadership practices in low achieving settings correlate with a number of factors that include: (1) the environment (school climate); (2) the principals' own past professional experiences and professional staff development; (3) the issue of empowerment, i.e., diverse leadership roles among staff, as well as genuine participatory decision-making; and, (4) the principals' capacity to reflect-in-action.

The data suggest that the principals in this study of low achieving schools responded to the central office school improvement initiative by: (1) utilizing it as "a vehicle" to initiate school improvement efforts; and, (2) inculcating it as "a mechanism" to accelerate positive changes in the learning environment.

Two chief implications of this study are that (1) school districts' planning, research and evaluation units can facilitate increased positive impact of improvement initiatives through the methodologies of action research and ethnography; and, (2) researchers' and practitioners' capacity to achieve positive educational outcomes is enhanced by the

ability to reflect-in-action, in consonance with others, on leadership, decision-making and practices that seek to improve education.

The context of this study was a central office school improvement initiative in a large northeastern urban public school district. The central office school improvement initiative was designed to assist selected low achieving schools in replicating the essential elements of successful schools: school climate conducive to learning; schoolwide emphasis on basic skills; a system of clear instructional objectives for monitoring and assessing students' performances; and a principal who is a strong programmatic leader and who sets high standards, communicates high expectations, frequently observes classrooms, and creates incentives for learning. An important component of the program was extensive administrative, teacher, and parent training to support the reshaped school. Schools involved in the project followed a standard model which included a School Improvement Council, parent scholars, use of the mandated District curriculum, and development of a positive self-image among students. In addition to the two junior high schools, 18 elementary schools were involved in the project.

Two case studies were produced from the research, and they contribute to potentially family-resembling models of research on school effectiveness and school improvement. This study's focus, principals' reflection-in-action, is not prevalent in the research literature, but neither is it without a basis. Recently, it has been suggested that principals' reflective capacities are impacted by "contextual antecedents" (Dwyer, 1985); and inhibited by "situational constraints to experiential learning" (Peterson, 1985).

The concept of reflection-in-action has historical precedence in education and research. It correlates with individuals' decision-making and leadership; and it is related to such concepts as: (1) research as praxis (Lather, 1986); (2) tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1967); (3) phenomenology (van Manen, 1984); and, (4) deutero-learning, which is learning to learn (Argyris, 1983; Argyris & Schon, 1974; Bateson, 1972; Schon; 1982; Torbert, 1972).

The Practice of Reflection-In-Action

Reflective analysis characterized the interview process that occurred between the researcher and practitioners, i.e., school principals (Pugh, 1986). The discussion of the principals' job performance, leadership and decision-making was correlated with the school effectiveness literature and instructional leadership. In some instances during the interview process, principals learned and/or provided a perspective on the discussion of research literature which focused on school improvement and project implementation.

The reflection-on-practice that occurred between the principal and researcher was facilitated by: (1) ethnographic data - observations derived by the researcher's shadowing the principal, participating in school staff meetings, and profiling the school and community. School staff interviews and survey data that assessed school climate, leadership and project implementation prospects were completed by the researcher and independent "outside" consultants. The findings from the array of data sources were presented to the principals by the researcher. The researcher's role mirrored an "informed professional" with clients, i.e., the principals, and effectuated the information-sharing interplay associated with "action research interviews" (Lewin, 1945).

The action research interview process entails a cyclical process that is consistent with action research as an intervention methodology. It has been described as a six step approach: (1) identifying problems; (2) analyzing problems and determining pertinent causal factors; (3) formulating tentative ideas about the crucial factors; (4) gathering and interpreting data to sharpen these ideas and to develop action hypotheses; (5) formulating action; and, (6) evaluating the results of action (Taba & Noel, 1957). Associated with the interview process and reflection-in-action between the researcher and principals were the issues of (building) trust levels and cooperation. The development of an implicit "reflective contract" provided both the principals and researcher with "discovery - about the meaning of... advice... knowledge-in-practice... a continuing process of self-education" (Schon, 1983, p. 299).

Action Research/Ethnography and Reflection-In-Action

The methodology used in this study had a profound impact on the researcher, the principals, and the study's results. The data were extensive and insightful due to the action research-ethnographic approach. Action research provided the researcher with first-hand exposure to perceived and articulated problems expressed by the principals and school staffs. The researcher was given the unique opportunity to engage in problem-solving in concert with the principals and school staffs. The principals' instructional leadership behaviors were documented, or limitations discussed based on observations and the suggested findings from the other data sources.

The researcher and principals participated in a shared reflective process. As a result, due to the emphasis on school improvement and

project implementation, the researcher and principals increased their capacity to be agents of change. The developing competencies and the experiences that both researcher and principals reflected upon served as prerequisites for learning, and decision-making.

Recently, an emphasis in action science (Argyris, Putnam & Smith, 1985) has been to raise the question of, "whether or not ethnography can contribute significantly to altering the problems it describes" (Argyris, 1985, p. 178). The deep and rich descriptions inherent in ethnographies when combined with action research methodology make a study (research) potentially viable to the subjects, i.e., the clients.

The study of school effectiveness and school improvement projects implies that action researchers, administrators and "policy makers" recognize their roles as "change agents" (Edmonds, 1977, 1979, 1980). As an action researcher, one's role is truncated unless the realities of school improvements/school effectiveness in underachieving settings are addressed in concert with others via a reflective process on problem-framing and problem-solving.

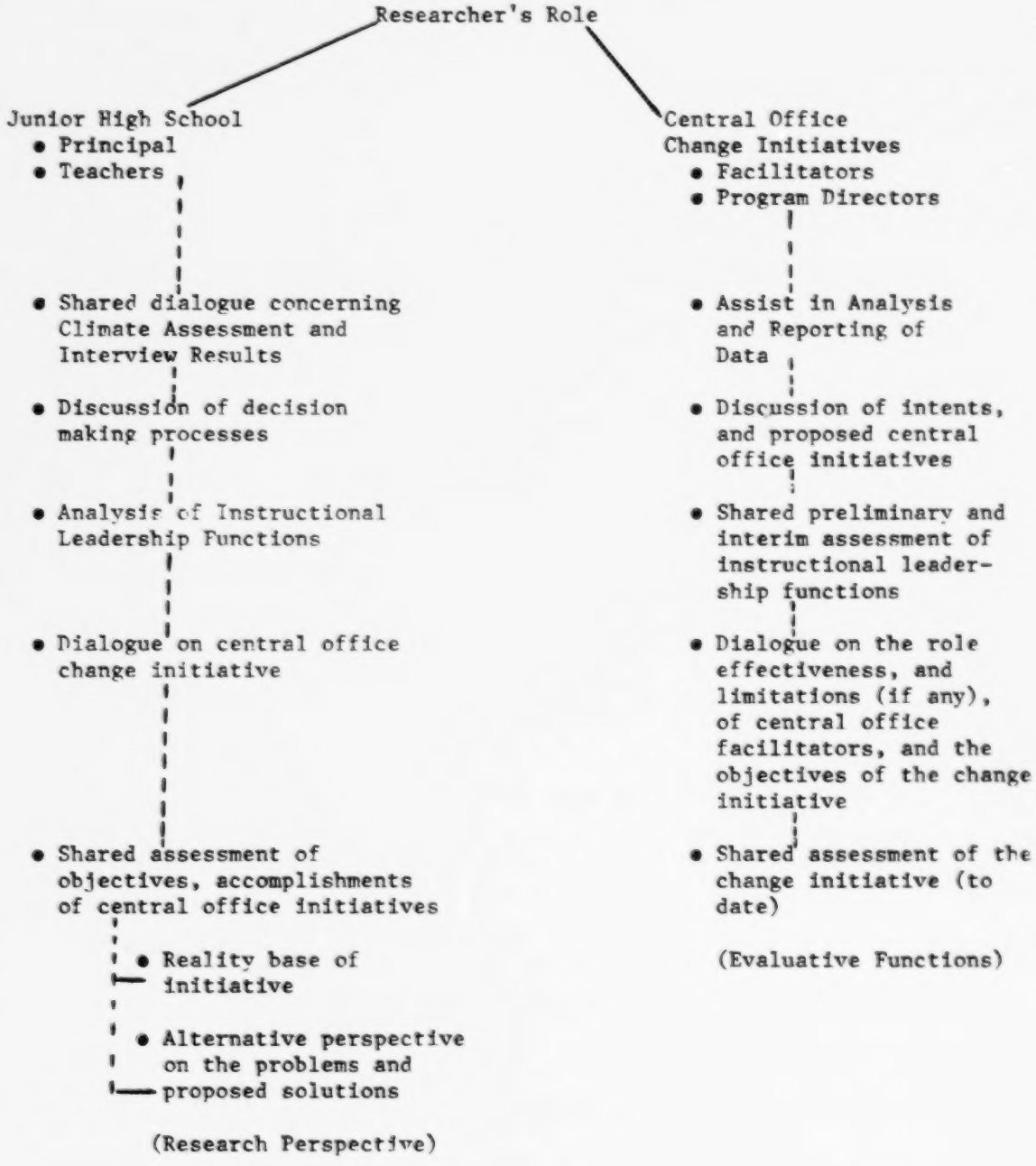
Conclusion: The Researcher's Dual Role

In this study it was necessary to delineate the responsibilities associated with the roles of researcher/program evaluator (see attached, Figure 1) in order to avoid role conflicts and to maintain the focus. The chief merit of functioning in a dual capacity, in this instance, was that as a program evaluator increased access to the settings and subjects, i.e., principals and teachers, was facilitated. While issues of role conflict inherent in the evaluator's position could not be ignored, negotiating a role that was "in harmony with standards for acceptable professional behavior" (Korr, 1982) was achieved. In addition, the issue

Figure 1.

Researcher's Role Delineation

In order to avoid or minimize role conflict, the following examination and clarification of roles were adhered to:


Researcher's Role
Junior High School
• Principal
• Teachers
• Shared dialogue concerning Climate Assessment and Interview Results
• Discussion of decision making processes
• Analysis of Instructional Leadership Functions
• Dialogue on central office change initiative
• Shared assessment of objectives, accomplishments of central office initiatives
• Reality base of initiative
• Alternative perspective on the problems and proposed solutions
(Research Perspective)
Central Office Change Initiatives
• Facilitators
• Program Directors
• Assist in Analysis and Reporting of Data
• Discussion of intents, and proposed central office initiatives
• Shared preliminary and interim assessment of instructional leadership functions
• Dialogue on the role effectiveness, and limitations (if any), of central office facilitators, and the objectives of the change initiative
• Shared assessment of the change initiative (to date)
(Evaluative Functions)

(Pugh, 1986)

of "objectivity" in both the role of researcher and program evaluator was considered.

In ethnography the concepts of subjectivity and bias are at the forefront in the researcher's descriptive prose. For example, during this study the research process was detailed in the writer's descriptive narratives. Through reflection-in-action the researcher attempted to state and identify in writing his "bias," that is, his perspective on the on-going study and principals. As Schon (1982) points out, "...A judgment is objective in the sense that it is 'independent of think-so'" (p. 42-43). Miles and Huberman (1984) also address this issue in their discussions on drawing valid meaning from qualitative data.

Additionally, Sergiovanni (1984) suggests that the issue of bias linked to reality is important, "...However science is described, bias is always a part of its reality" (p. 26). In Lather (1986) the issue of validation and value-free standards are seen as "a contradiction in terms" (Cronbash in Lather, pp. 269-270).

Faced with the above perspectives on qualitative research objectivity and related concerns, the researcher/program evaluator's role in this study was not "irreparably compromised." Instead, the role of action researcher provided an opportunity to achieve positive intervention in the settings leading to "research praxis-negotiation, reciprocity and empowerment" (Lather, 1986). A sense of "social consciousness related to action research" (Lewin, 1945), and theory-building as a result of the data that were generated developed (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Glaser & Strauss, 1980).

In the dual role described above, the researcher in this study was given the opportunity to discover, evaluate and dialogue with school

principals (and others) concerned with project implementation. The goals of the project and the study's focus were school improvement and instructional leadership. Action science suggests that as a prerequisite for increasing professional competency, and in order to change negative work routines of managers, administrators, i.e., principals, requires an involved, competent and reflective personality (researcher). The researcher must be an interventionist who engages in an implicit or explicit cooperative, reflective contractual arrangement in which verbal defensiveness is exposed and discussed, and professional respect maintained (Argyris, 1983; Argyris, et. el., 1985). In the evaluative role of interventionist, i.e., action researcher, one potentially becomes an agent for change.

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APPENDIX: Figure 2: A Typology of Principals' Instructional Leadership Practices

A Typology of Instructional Leadership

This study focused on reflection-in-action as a principal's learning and decision-making tool. The research on school effectiveness/school improvement projects was the basis for understanding the instructional leadership practices of two junior high school principals. This was school-based research that used the methodologies of action research and ethnography.

As a researcher/program evaluator, increased access to the settings and to "the informants," e.g., the principals, was possible. Extensive interview data were generated, along with thick descriptive ethnographic narratives. Combined with a number of survey data sources "triagulation" was attempted (Jick, 1979). The analysis and interpretation of the interview data raise issues of individuality and generality (Trumbull, 1985).

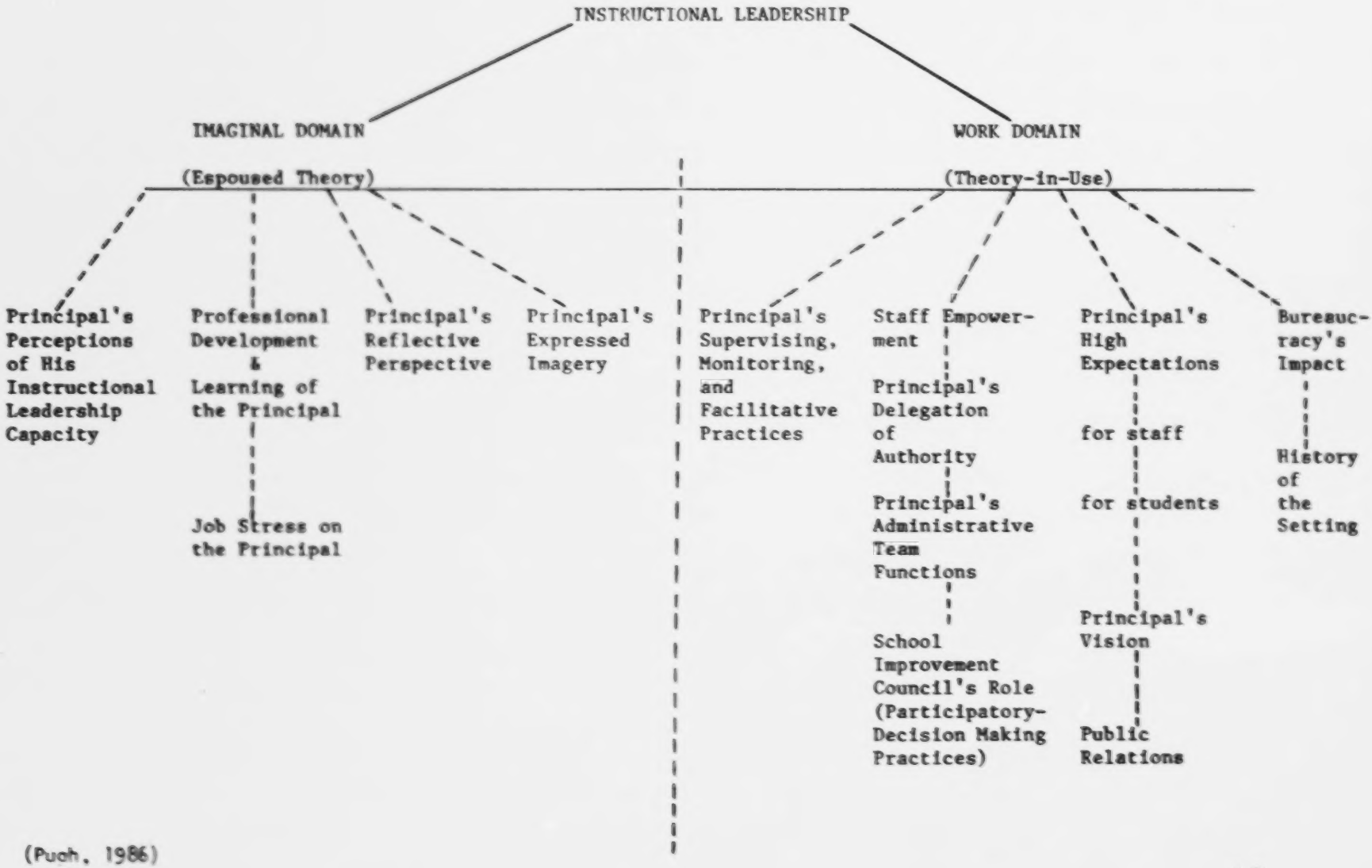
The reliance on domain analysis (Spradley, 1979), and grounded-based theory development (Glaser & Strauss, 1980) led to the development of "A Typology of Principals' Instructional Leadership Practices" (see attached Figure 2).

The educational research literature has consistently called for "thick descriptions" of principals' activities and conceived theories-in-use, juxtaposed with espoused - theory. That has been addressed in one form in this study through action research interviews between the researcher and principals. The interviews consisted of a recapitulation of descriptive events, principals' reflective statements (metaphors), and school climate assessment data.

On the basis of the conceptual framework, detailed in the diagram, an understanding of school principals' instructional leadership practices

Figure 2.

A TYPOLOGY OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES
OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS



(Puah, 1986)

can be delineated. This typology was derived from the study of two junior high school principals. It is not offered as a generalizable theoretical construct. However, in a study of school improvement projects that focuses on instructional leadership and school principals, this conceptual construct does suggest that data which comprise the components of the typology can serve as a basis for understanding the development of instructional leadership practices of school principals.

IMAGINAL DOMAIN (Espoused Theory): This is the principal's expressed feelings, beliefs, and perceptions relating to imagination, images, or imagery. It also suggests the idealized mental image of another person or the self. The imaginal domain includes the following categories:

- Principal's Perceptions of His Instructional Leadership Capacity - the principal's self-appraisal of his performance. The focus entails the principal's analysis of his behavior, and his response to the perceptions of others as to his instructional leadership practices.
- Professional Development and Learning (Staff Development) - the principal's appraisal of staff development sessions which focus on developing instructional leadership; his assessment of the learning experiences he was exposed to and the impact that such experiences had on his development and instructional leadership.
- Job Stress - its existence, impact, and the principal's responses for coping.
- Principal's Reflective Perspective - the principal's capacity to analyze and discuss his previous actions while engaging in a cyclical process of work routines, his on-going problem assessment, and his proposed solutions.

. Principal's Expressed Imagery (Metaphors/Generative Metaphors) - the language used by the principal to define, interpret, or discuss situations and circumstances that may be seen as problematic. The use of figurative language denotes this category. A distinction between metaphor and generative metaphor may be understood as follows: Metaphoric imagery is the use of language in which a word or phrase literally denotes one kind of object or idea used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them. A generative metaphor is suggested as an animate or inanimate object in which the represented object has a quality that produces actions which suggest a causal response, activity, and/or resulting impact. "It is a seed bed of imaginative options or ways of thinking about problems" (Schon, 1979; 1983).

WORK DOMAIN (Theory-in-Use): This is the behavioral aspect of the principal's employment situation that encompasses the routines, his expressed views and decisions, as well as the amorphous bureaucracy's impact. The following categories are included:

. Principal's Supervising, Monitoring, and Facilitative Practices - the work done by the principal that entails a range of managerial activities which include active participation, and interactions with others that contribute to employees' self-worth, professional development and understanding of their job performance.

. Staff Empowerment - the principal's actions and decisions which allow others to have the authority to act in given circumstances; through the use of delegation of authority and participatory decision-making, the principal provides his administrative team

member(s) (vice principals), teachers and other staff the opportunity (and right) to influence or determine policy related matters.

. Principal's High Expectations (and Public Relations) - the expressed beliefs of the principal toward staff and students which support the premise of trust and faith in others' competencies. The use of public relations, and an expressed vision - lofty goals, to affirm one's high expectations, suggest a posture (by the principal) of commitment. Public relations also include the principal's attempts to publicize the successes of the organization, as well as have a positive impact on community relations (i.e., parents, and students).

. Bureaucracy's Impact - the hierarchical structure of the organization that encompasses the entire school system, the individual school, and the departmental units of the school which operate on prescribed policy. Also, included is the human element that provides life to the organization; and the history - the organization's record of success/failure that directly influences the individuals (principal and others), in both positive and negative terms.